

# SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND



## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN GENERATIONS OF ARAB WOMEN IN ART

- A DIALOGUE BETWEEN GENERATIONS OF ARAB WOMEN •
- REWIND: REFLECTIONS ON THE ARTIST AS MOTHER •
- IN THE LIBRARY WITH LAURE GHORAYEB •
- IN CONVERSATION WITH HRH PRINCESS WIJDAN ALI •





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## THE POWER OF THE IMAGE

**Selections** talks to six talented female photographers from the Arab world and Iran whose work spans the gulf between East and West, transcending language and culture to tell universal stories

by India Stoughton

Some of the world's most talented photographers hail from the Arab world and Iran. Today, whether they live at home or overseas, they find themselves caught between two regions failing to connect, in a world where Islamophobia and misapprehensions run rampant.

Each of the six women interviewed in this issue deals with this in their own way, some choosing to address the gulf between East and West directly in their work, others approaching it more obliquely. Yet ultimately, each achieves a similar alchemy — using photography as a tool, they are able to transform and translate their personal experiences into a universal format, rendering their subject matter accessible to people of any background, challenging harmful stereotypes and championing new perspectives.

Iraqi-American photographer **Sama Alshaibi** tells *Selections* how Arab women in the U.S. are under siege and reveals details of her upcoming project, *Carry Over*, which sets out to deconstruct colonial images of women from the Middle East and North Africa.

Iranian photographer **Gohar Dashti** explains how her photographs of Iran, rooted in personal experience and memory, help to explore Iran's culture and history in a new light and why her photographs of humans are bound up with nature.

**Lalla Essaydi**, a Moroccan photographer based in the U.S., details how she employs the composition and tropes of Orientalist paintings

**01: Sama Alshaibi**, *Ma Lam Tabki (Unless weeping)* from *Silsila* series, 166 x 250 cm, diasec print, 2014

**03: Lalla Essaydi**, *Harem # 10*, chromogenic print, 2009, courtesy of the artist and of Houk gallery, New York

**05: Rania Matar**, *Unspoken Conversations - Mothers & Daughters, Elizabeth and Austin*, photograph, Boston Massachusetts, 2016, courtesy of the artist

**02: Gohar Dashti**, *Untitled* from the series *Home*, 2017, 120 x 80 cm, courtesy of the artist, © Gohar Dashti

**04: Nermine Hammam**, *Dreamland*, 1, from the *Upekkha* series, 90 x 68 cm, 2011, courtesy of the artist

**06: Randa Mirza**, *The Year of the Elephant*, 2014, diorama, credits: Galerie Tanit and the artist

to provoke viewers into new ways of seeing, overturning expectations and subverting Orientalist attitudes.

Egyptian photographer **Nermine Hammam** shares her thoughts on how her photographs inspired by the Egyptian revolution explore an imbalance of male and female energies in a timeless style that renders individual experience universal.

**Rania Matar**, a Lebanese-American photographer, explains how her relationship with her two daughters led to a fascination with girls and women growing up and navigating transition and why she makes sure every series is shot in Lebanon and the U.S.

Finally, Lebanese photographer **Randa Mirza** discusses the image as a marker of identity, her work uncovering the lost pre-Islamic myths that centre on female power and the artist's role as a cultural ambassador. ■





## The Beauty of Growing Up

Lebanese-American photographer **Rania Matar** photographs women and girls, exploring periods of growth and transition

The process of aging — and the experience, emotional growth and maturity that come with it — is something we all experience personally but are often able to observe and quantify only in other people. This alchemistic process is at the heart of Rania Matar's work. Born and raised in Lebanon before moving to the U.S. in 1984, the photographer has two daughters and watching them grow and change has inspired several series of work. Over the past decade, she has focused on girls and women, capturing their inner and outer worlds, their growth and evolution, and the relationships between them.

In *A Girl and Her Room*, she captured teenagers in their bedrooms, exploring their increasing need for independence and their first forays into self-expression. The series was followed by *L'Enfant Femme*, capturing the vulnerability and bravado of girls on the cusp of puberty. *Becoming* revisits the same girls a few years later, while *Unspoken Conversations* captures teenagers approaching adulthood alongside their mothers. These photos are particularly captivating due to the complexity of the relationships captured through a sidelong glance or a half-glimpsed expression.

"When my older daughter left for college, I realised that I still feel like I'm 25 but I'm a middle-aged woman and it made me think quite a bit about my role as a mother changing and the fact that I'm getting older and she's growing up," Matar says. "There were so many layers to that moment, and then my relationship with her changed and we became much closer when she left home. The other personal aspect to that is I lost my own mother when I was three years old, so I'm really discovering that first-hand."

A common thread running throughout the series is Matar's decision to photograph women in the U.S. and in Lebanon for each.



**opposite page top:** Rania Matar, *A Girl and Her Room Alia*, Beirut Lebanon, photograph, 2010, courtesy of the artist

**opposite page bottom:** Rania Matar, *A Girl and Her Room Emma*, Brookline Massachusetts, photograph, 2009, courtesy of the artist

**above:** Rania Matar, *Becoming, Samira 17*, (Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp, Beirut Lebanon), photograph, 2016, courtesy of the artist

"I'm always hyper-aware of that whole conversation in the news about "them" and "us" and it seems to keep getting worse, instead of better," she says. "Because I live in the West I feel like a lot of the work people want to see often has this Orientalist aspect to it — they are still fascinated with the veil, with war, and I feel like people forget sometimes there are just normal, regular people who live here, so for me it's important to portray that and to portray that universality. Even though each girl and woman that I photograph has such a specific identity and individuality, there is a universality to growing up and to growing old and to mother-daughter relationships and to going through transitions." ■